

KOKUA HAWAII ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEW WITH
Nora Gozon Tagalog



Nora Gozon Tagalog
Photo courtesy of the Tagalog family

In the fight to stop an eviction in the Filipino community of Ota Camp in Waipahu, Nora Gozon Tagalog represented her family and relatives and attended meetings regularly, participated in numerous protests, and became a part of the community's steering committee. Gozon Tagalog, who continued to work as a nurse's aide, also became the second wife of Ota Camp Makibaka Association President Pete Tagalog. She was interviewed by Gary T. Kubota on October 24, 2017, at her home in Ota Camp in West Loch, where the Ota Camp residents moved as a community after the city and state provided land and housing respectively for them. The relocation included a rent-to-own option, in which tenants could apply their rent to owning their homes, and she now owns her

house. Pete died on May 28, 2012, at age 80, but not before Hawaii legislators passed a resolution recognizing his contributions to his community.

GK: Good morning, Nora. When and where were you born?

NG (Nora): I was born August 1951 in Davao Del Norte in Mindanao, the Philippines.

GK: What did your father do for a living?

NG: My dad was a farmer.

GK: When did you arrive in Hawaii?

NG: I came to Hawaii in April, 1970.

GK: How did you get here?

NG: My mom died in the Philippines when I was 12 years old. My dad had been in Hawaii for five months and worked for the gas company. My sister, brother and I, along with two other younger children, moved to Hawaii. We mainly lived with my uncle in Hawaii who already had nine kids. My uncle's family had too much pressure because of overcrowding. So, we moved to an apartment in Pua Lane in Honolulu with another uncle. My younger sister below me, my younger brother and I found jobs. We worked at Dole Company. I was almost 19.

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GK: And what did you do?

NG: I was a trimmer at the cannery. My brother was also a trimmer, and my sister was a packer.

GK: How did you get to Ota Camp eventually?

NG: In 1970 before school started, my grandfather's friend Manang Porton Manzano knew of a vacant house in Ota Camp. The house we stayed at was near Manang Porton's house. We rented it for \$20 a month. We moved there almost at the end of 1970. I worked in the cannery in the summer and worked as a dishwasher at Country Inn in Waipahu and later as a dishwasher and waitress at Wailani Inn Restaurant owned by Hideo "Major" Okada's family.

GK: I remember Major Okada came to regular weekly meetings of Ota Camp to show support for residents. What kind of guy was Major Okada?

NG: He and his wife were very down to earth persons. His wife knew about me. She always set aside food at the restaurant for me to bring home for my brothers and sisters. She was very nice to me. We're just lucky we had \$20 rent. Even though the house had puka puka roof, we use buckets and pots and pans to catch the rain water. It was okay. At least we had a place.

GK: When did you first learn about the eviction?

NG: I was a senior at Waipahu High School in early 1972.

GK: What was your reaction to it?

NG: It was kind of hard. You know what I mean. I really didn't know where we'd go. I was relying on my income and occasional paychecks from my sister and brother. My dad only gave me money when he remembers.

GK: What happened?

NG: When we received the eviction notice, Pete really didn't know what to do. Somehow, all of a sudden, he called for a meeting. At first, I remember Peter Thompson and other Leeward Community College political friends supported Pete to get started. Kokua Hawaii came later.

GK: How did you feel to know that outside people supported you?

NG: It felt good because we realized we were not alone in our fight against the eviction. It's normal for people to think we should abide by the law. You know what I mean? We had

a hard time to convince some residents to be open-minded and to stay and fight. Some residents took time to convince. The supporters helped to change the residents' minds.

GK: What about attorney Herb Takahashi?

NG: Herb Takahashi came in as our attorney, after Pete fired a haole attorney. Herb was a good man, very smart. He's very down to earth, sharp, sharp guy. Thank God for that. He became popular with residents of Ota Camp. After the successful grassroots struggle of Ota Camp, attorney Takahashi became a well-known attorney.

GK: Were you there when the Honolulu city administration officials came to inspect Ota Camp and meet with Pete?

NG: Yes, they went house to house meeting people. Because of that meeting, Honolulu Mayor Frank Fasi offered the city land at West Loch for relocation.

GK: What do you want people to remember about Pete Tagalog?

Nora: He was a unique leader. I remember there were lots of obstacles in the beginning. Some tried to stop him from being a leader. They would offer him relocation. But he stood for the people. I want the people to remember him as a good leader and honest and hard worker for the people. Pete's family is from Cebu. He was Visayan. So he was a Visayan trying to organize Ota Camp where most were Ilocano. He didn't speak Ilocano, but somehow he understood enough.

GK: That's right. Johnny Dombrique was Ilocano, and he had many relatives and family living in his complex.

NG: I didn't know what is prejudice or discrimination among Filipinos themselves until I was in Hawaii. Where I grew up in Mindanao in the Philippines, we were surrounded by Ilocano. We also had different dialects, but the conflicts weren't the same. When I came over here, when everyone started to go to school, I saw the difference. They're trying to destroy one another. They fight each other. They no like me because I'm Visayan, and they are Ilocano.

GK: Johnny was a big supporter of the struggle, wasn't he?

NG: Yes. He was a strong supporter of Pete. One hundred percent. He was the leader of his clan, and they were good in cooking food for special Ota Camp parties. Pete never give up on explaining to Johnny about the struggle.

GK: Yes, Johnny Dombrique used to meet me sometimes, and we would get together at Waimanu Home Road, where George Santos had his pig farm, and then Johnny would pick the pig for the feast.

NG: Yes.

GK: It was a good experience for me too. Do you remember the Diamond Jubilee, the 75th anniversary of Waipahu, when Ota Camp tenants made the Nipa hut float on the flatbed truck?

NG: Yeah. That was a good time too. Everybody worked. Ota Camp residents marched in front of the float. We had good comments about the float from the Waipahu community

GK: What did the community say?

NG: The Waipahu residents could see the Ota Camp community and were cheering. Good things came out of us having the parade float. I felt they were saying, "Let's support Ota Camp in their struggle." It was an opportunity to see us, not only like hearsay, or what they read.

GK: Yeah, right. And I remember that Kokua Hawaii poster helped. Jim Young took the photograph of residents including dogs and children. I designed the poster, then we printed the poster, and distributed it all over Waipahu and all over Oahu, hundreds of them, to build awareness of the eviction fight.

NG: Yes. It helped encourage and inspire the residents to fight for the cause.

GK: How important was it to have other ethnic groups supporting this kind of struggle?

NG: It's very important. It's very important that we have the support, not just only the residents, but outside, because, to me, the struggle was dealing with evictions. I believe the fight for one community is the struggle for all. At first, we don't know what to do. We don't know how to go about it. But with the support from outside, groups of all kinds and different walks of life helped our cause. Of course, we vote too. You need the support around you in order to win for your struggle. That's what I learned from the past struggle.

GK: Do you remember that time when Kokua Hawaii asked Ota Camp to support Ethnic Studies and a number of residents went on campus at the University of Hawaii to support Ethnic Studies?

NG: Yeah. Only some can make it. They also had less knowledge to support Ethnic Studies.

GK: You're right. I asked Pete to come because Ethnic Studies instructors, such as Pete Thompson, were the ones who provided the research against the Ota Camp eviction, and Ethnic Studies needed the community's support. There were presidents of other community groups who also joined in the sit-in.

NG: That's true.